

Letter from Charles Sumner Tainter to Alexander Graham Bell, September 30, 1885, with transcript

Folder, Graphophone, 1878–99, Copy of a letter written by Sumner Tainter to Dr. Bell. drawer 12 Belvedere House, N. York, Sept. 30, 1885. My dear Mr. Bell:

Your letter of the 29th together with a copy of the letter you sent to Mr. Johnson, received. I say most emphatically that I do not agree with what you have written to Mr. Johnson, and I can imagine the broad smile which came over his face when he read it, and wondered if you take him for a fool. Now I have had several interviews with our friend Johnson and so far from being a fool I think he is a very smart and shrewd business man and one not likely to be bulldozed.

To talk about organizing a company on our inventions and putting them into commercial use is sheer nonsense for you know as well as I do that we can do nothing of the sort without the permission of the Phonograph Co.

I believe firmly with Mr. Johnson that the best arrangement for all concerned would be one in which there is a consolidation of interests so that all can work together to improve the instrument and make it of extended use. We would then secure some of the benefits of what Edison and others may do instead of running in opposition to them.

If we should start a company and go to manufacturing there would immediately be a dozen others start up also and all would stand on the same footing. The Phonograph Co. would never give us an exclusive license for they would be simply fools if they did.

I think an arrangement similar to the scheme proposed by Johnson the best for us only we must have a larger interest in the concern.

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Mr. Johnson has repeatedly expressed himself as being perfectly willing to divide equally with use just as soon as we succeed in proving that we have a practical thing. Not simply a practical apparatus but practical articulation that can be understood by persons of ordinary intelligence without too much effort. This we have not done to his satisfaction so he says and it is what I have been laboring for the past few weeks to accomplish. I understood that the principal object of having these instruments made was to prove this point and I have promised Johnson to let him have an instrument for trial — not to give but to lend it to him — just as soon as I could succeed in getting one into the proper condition, and he together with Edison will make some experiments and then decide what proposition they will make for our consideration.

Mr. Johnson has promised me that if the results of the experiments with the new instrument are satisfactory that he will be willing to reorganize the old company upon the basis of giving one half the stock for the inventions and reserving one half to be sold at par for working expenses. Of the half given for inventions one half will go to us and the balance to the Edison interests. This seems to me to be as fair an arrangement as we can expect and one that I would be perfectly satisfied with.

Of course it will give the moneyed men concerned in the scheme an advantage for they can buy the stock while the poor devils will have to be contented with what they receive for their inventions.

Now in regard to the new instruments: I came here about the middle of Aug. and immediately set to work to design what seemed to me 3 to be a good and efficient apparatus. Not exactly such an instrument as I should design if they were going to be made by the thousands, but an efficient practical machine. I designed the apparatus and made the drawings in my room at the hotel and the Edison people were not aware of what I was doing, nor have I introduced a single feature into the machine which was suggested by the other side.

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When my drawings were sufficiently far advanced I took them to the factory and have had the machine made just as any other experimenter would and have paid for what I have had done. Not only paid for it but have given a good round sum and more than what I have received has been worth. The delay has been caused by my not being able to get the men to make the instruments. You will remember that I was promised as many men as I wanted and I thought I could have at least half a dozen and get the work out quickly. Soon after I commenced work I found that out of the 200 men employed in the factory only about half a dozen were competent to do such work as I had and they had a lot of experimental work for other parties to do, so they commenced by giving me one man and that man the one I had brought from Washington with me.

I made a fuss about this and finally they put on two more men both of whom I found to be incompetent to do the work, and after several weeks I found that they were progressing so slowly and poorly I had them taken off, and now only have two good men at work which is all I can get. If I had known how things were going to turn out I should have hired two or three more men and made the instruments in Washington for I find that their facilities for such work here are no better than we have at our shop, and I could have saved at least one third in the cost. They charge me fifty cents an hour for men that they pay twenty five for. When I found things were going along so slowly I had them devote their time as much as possible to getting one machine finished and I expect to get that one in condition to try in a day or two. The others will not be done for a couple of weeks at least.

Now I would suggest that you come on here as soon as I get this machine adjusted and try it and if satisfactory let us make the experiments for Messrs. Johnson and Edison. The new machines I think will prove very handy to use and will give better results than the old one for I have much improved both the recorder and reproducer.

There is one thing that I have fully made up my mind to and that is to drop this thing unless there is some arrangement made by which I can be earning something to live upon as I

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have now the interests of another to consult besides my own and I cannot afford to waste any more time over this invention unless I can see a favorable termination immediately.

Hoping that the above will prove satisfactory, I am,

Yours sincerely, SUMNER TAINTER.